

FOREWORD

One of education's most enduring lessons is perception: our ability to see ourselves, our place in the world, and those with whom we share the planet. We all begin with a myopic view of the world—we often think that what we see, others will view the same way. Educators, therefore, need to provide students with experiences through which they come to understand what thoughts shape their viewpoints and what contexts inform their own perceptions and those of others. By challenging individual perspectives, we widen our students' eyes and open them to a much larger world.

Of course, it is not enough to simply immerse students in educational experiences where they observe and watch; educators must assist students in synthesizing those experiences: to help them examine what they have witnessed in relation to what they have previously learned, and to constantly push students toward ever more refined and subtle perceptions. Indeed, an understanding of the diverse perspectives of the world is one of the most important strengths students can bring to the workplace and to their lives.

When we think about our students entering the workforce, or for some reentering it after college graduation, we know many jobs that existed a decade ago have disappeared and that certain jobs of the future have not yet been invented. Perhaps at no other time in the history of our country has transition in the working world been so rapid or unpredictable. With such accelerated change, those of us in the academy must ask ourselves, "What is the best way to prepare our students for the ever-shifting landscape of tomorrow?"

The past few decades have seen considerable effort among institutions of higher education to develop students' critical thinking: to take a problem, analyze it, examine context, and evaluate validity. Yet, all too often the thinking stops there, and students are not pushed to examine a problem and create solutions of their own. The question we need to begin posing to our students is, "So what now?" Providing opportunities for our students to take a crack at solving the world's problems is one of the most profound ways to take them seriously. In so doing, we are not only preparing them for the future, but moving them now to take the next generational step.

As the liberal education offered by colleges and universities evolves in response to emerging global challenges, we need to think not so much about how to make students more specialized, but rather how to prepare them to handle vacillating demands. Requiring students to reach and explore uncharted territory that moves them in unforeseen directions and encouraging them to embrace what can be learned from what does not go as planned fosters intellectual agility. The capacity to move with surprising circumstances is a skill that will prepare our students not only for a wide range of workplace options, but will also equip them to deal with a future none of us can fully predict.

Assignments that take students into undiscovered realms and involve long-range projects where no clear outcome is in sight can be intimidating opportunities for learning. Yet, I would argue that part of students' unease with calling upon this type of creativity comes from a lack of practice. Students must be pushed to test the edges of their own ambition in course and cocurricular activities designed to promote discovery, cultivate creativity, and spark innovation.

Gone are the days when a person retired from the same employer he or she signed on with at the age of twenty-two. Today's college graduates will have a dozen or more jobs in a lifetime, and it is not enough to teach a set of skills that will enable someone to work for a specific length of time in one particular profession. Thus, traditional curricular models that follow previous patterns of breadth followed by depth are no longer adequate and must be replaced in favor of a revitalized curriculum that provides hands-on experience with unscripted, real-world problems.



This volume responds to the call for the development of frameworks that meet the demands of the future through the incorporation of big-picture, cross-disciplinary inquiry and students' active engagement in experiential learning and other high-impact practices, with increasing rigor, across all disciplines. The case studies contained within demonstrate the significance of the LEAP Challenge, grounded in the notion that every student should be prepared to complete signature work that provides evidence of proficiency in problem-centered inquiry and integrative thinking. Such assignments make clear the relationships among areas of knowledge, ensuring that students do not see academic disciplines as separate and disconnected silos of learning, but rather as varied approaches to the same enlightened end. Applied liberal learning, offered to all students across every major, is one of the best approaches to cultivating the perception, intellectual agility, and creative thinking necessary for them to thrive in a globally interdependent, innovation-fueled economy.

I am deeply grateful to those colleges and universities leading the way with the creation of best practices in catalyzing integrative pathways to student signature work. Through ongoing collaboration, we can enhance the capacity of each individual institution to provide students with a liberal education that is inextricably linked to both equity and quality, while at the same time teaching twenty-first-century skills. Our students, and our democracy, deserve nothing less.

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